

An Exhortation to a free and impartial Enquiry into the Doctrines of Religion.

THose that have any belief or regard of Religion, believe too, that 'tis the most weighty and serious of Things; because therein the Glory and Honour of GOD, and the Salvation of Sou's, are concerned. Accordingly there are very few, if any at all, who make the least doubt, that 'tis of very high Concernment to be of the Right Faith: and by how much the controverted Point of Faith, does more apparently and nearly relate to the Glory of GOD; by so much does every Persuasion or Sect, and every particular Man think himself interested, to be truly informed about it. But as this is so, it may be observed also, that any Belief or Doctrine which has been long received, gains such a Reputation, and Authority over the Minds of most Men, that they count it an Impiety, and at best an Affectation of Novelty; to call over and examine again the Grounds, on which it was received at first, as such an Indubitable and Sacred Truth. This fatal Error makes some Men fly from, and abhor Information about such Articles of their Faith: so that having once imbibed one such Error, they resolutely live and die in it. Let us therefore consider in this place, whether a *free and sincere* Inquiry into the Particulars of that Religion, which we were taught before we were well capable of judging, be not every one's Duty and Wisdom, as a Man, as a Christian, and as a Protestant?

I may say, That this is one of those Doubts, whereof the very putting of it, in proper and apt Words, is to resolve it.

For can any thing be more becoming of a Man, more agreeable to the Dignity, or more apparently the Duty of our Rational Natures, than in our adult, advanced, and capable Years to believe, not because we have been thus taught, but because upon review and after trial, we are satisfied? Of all the Uses for which our Reason was designed, this without peradventure was the principal; to make use of it chiefly and most of all, in Causes and Questions relating to the Eternal World, and to our Hopes and Interests therein; that is (as every one will confess) in the Causes and Questions of Faith and Religion. How can I expect that World, at the hands of GOD; if what I believe concerning him, or what I practise towards him, is only by hearsay or hap of Education, and in no degree by my own Disquisition, Observation or Industry? He, *before whom are all our ways*, will judge both us and them, because they were the Actions of rational and free Creatures; if either we were not Rational or were not Free, He would not regard what we believ'd or what we did; but being both these, our Reward from him will be in exact proportion to the use we have made of our Reason and of our Liberty. Therefore he (or she) that has made no use of his Reason, but abandon'd himself to the uncertain chance of Education, or the religion of the Times and Laws, which vary with every Age and every Country: such Person (none I think can doubt) will at last be judged to be that idle and unprofitable Servant, who hid his Talent in a Napkin, and put not to use his Lord's Money: what

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the reward of every such Servant shall be, our Saviour has told us at *Mat. 23. 30.*

I am sensible however, that 'tis a certain Modesty and Diffidence of themselves, that makes some so cautious of Beliefs or Doctrines, new to them. They think themselves not qualified to make a sure Judgment; and therefore that by such freedom of Inquiry (as I am persuading) they do but hazard the exchanging an Opinion, recommended to them by the Providence of their Education, and by the sweetness and safety that there is in Unity and Peace, for an Opinion that will (perhaps) bring perpetual Disquies, both into their Mind and Life; and after all, they cannot be certain that 'tis true; since they are not perfectly qualified, *to judge of all Allegations for and against it.* I confess this were to the purpose; if God or Reason required of us an infallible Judgment, or an absolute Certainty within our selves; but these two belong to GOD alone, neither Men nor Angels can pretend to either of them. But because only GOD is infallible, and has absolute Certainty within himself, must Men or may Men believe all that has been taught them, without making such trial as their Leisure and their Abilities, whatever they be, serve them to make? What if our Abilities or Qualifications are not great, nay are small; the Servant who had but one Talent intrusted to his management, was required to use that one Talent, no less than he who had five, and was punish'd for not doing it: Nor is Truth entailed on the Learned and the Wise, for we see that many such are found in the most contrary Opinions; but 'tis (partly) a natural effect of, and (partly) the Gift of GOD upon, only a sincere, free and impartial Inquiry. Truth, especially religious Truth, is not so far from any of us, that the most Modest need to distrust their Sufficiency to enquire after it, and to find it out; if it were, it would not be required of any but the Learned and Wise to be of any Persuasion about Points that are disputed among the Learned: And if so, none but Learned Men, ~~none but~~ such as can *judge of all Allegations*

for and against the controverted Doctrines, might be either Papists or Protestants, either Calvinists or Remonstrants, either Trinitarians or Unitarians. All will confess this to be absurd, but it clearly follows, that whatever my Abilities or Qualifications are, I must use them: If they be small, all my Errors will be pardonable, except those that I took up on meer trust, without examining at all the Grounds of them; that is, the Errors imbibed merely from Education, from my Interests, Reverence of particular Men, from the Times or the Laws: Such Errors will not be pardoned, because they were wholly our fault: we would not hear any thing against them, nor judge as well as we could (and more is not our Duty) concerning them. As for our Peace and Ease, the other part of the Objection; We know not God, nor believe that (as the Apostle speaks) *He is a Rewarder of such as diligently seek him,* if we prefer the intire Repose and Security of this Momentary Life, to the true Knowledge of Him and of his Will.

Well, but may I not take it for a sufficient Proof of my Faith, and a sufficient Answer to all Objections against it, that so many most Learned and Pious Men assert and defend it, against (perhaps) a few and obscure Persons, of no reputation (that I know of) for either? Is it not a *rational Prejudice* against such and their Doctrines; that there is nothing so absurd and impious, which Affectors of Singularity and Novelty, do not every day advance, and that I see such as are most deservedly esteemed for Sobriety, Gravity, Sagacity, Experience, Learning and Probity, and all other Qualifications, do in the most serious and earnest Manner declare against them? What if they are obstinate and unreclaimable; Whimsy and Affectation are better and sooner cured by Physick or Punishment, than by Argument. Thus they are apt to argue, who would be esteemed Prudent, while they are only Lazy and Cowardly. They pretend the Learning and Piety of others, as an excuse for a blind or implicit Faith in what they have been taught
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by some such. Do they not perhaps know, that no Sect whatever, can boast of such Learned and Good Men, but that all other Sects have as Learned and Good? *Learning* is an Help both to discover and to defend Truth; but only *Freedom* and *Sincerity* are fit to be intirely trusted in that Search. The Learned (if you speak of such as are Priests or Ministers, or Beneficed Men) have such a Byass given to their Minds, by the awe of their Superiors, to whom they are accountable, by Fears of deprivation, in case of professed Heterodoxy, by their Subscriptions (before they were able to judge) to the Articles of their several Churches; that it may be said, their Learning gives no Authority to their Opinions: 'tis plain enough, that their Opinions are such, as the Conditions and Terms of Preferment (appointed by the Laws of the Countrey) do require of them; except when a Party is grown powerful enough to despise or to evade the Laws. The Learned Men of *Italy*, and in all the Dominions of *Spain*, are zealous and thorow Roman Catholicks; those of *France* are Roman Catholicks, but with a reserve to the Liberties of the Gallican Church, and the Regalities of the French Crown; in one Half of *Germany*, the Learned Men are Cath. licks, in the other Half they are Reformed; the Learned Men of *Denmark* and *Sweden* are Lutherans, the Learned in the *Alps* are Calvinists; of the Learned Men in *England*, some follow the Reformation by Arch-bishop *Cranmer*, and other Compilers of the Common Prayer, others follow those that settled first at *Frankford*, afterwards at *Geneva*. Does not this difference plainly show us, that it is not Learning, but *Sincerity* and *Freedom* that qualifies Men, to judge of the Doctrines of Religion? Let their Superiours leave the Learned to a true Freedom; that there may be no Forfeiture incurred by every Man's professing as he thinks, and then I will allow, that Learned Men are valuable Instruments towards the discovering and asserting of Truth. But while they are shackled by early Subscriptions, hopes of Preferment, fears of Punishment, and the

like Restraints, they are fitter to support the Kingdom of Darkness and Error, than to revive the true Light and genuine Gospel of our Lord Christ. But if still the regard of Learning be so great with any Person, that he intirely surrenders up his Judgment to the Dictates of such Men: I may tell such an one, that the Unitarians have a particular Reputation, as most skillful in that which is the proper Learning of Divines, the sacred Criticism; and are talk'd of by their Adversaries, as a sort of subtle, rational, and discerning Men: Particular Authors among them, *Erasmus*, *Grotius*, *Episcopius*, *Curcellæus*, *Crellius*, *Ruvius*, *Chillingworth*, all of them known Unitarians, are by all granted to be in the first rank of Learned Men.

But what, was the Gospel of our Dear Saviour written to the Learned and the Wise, to them only, or to them principally? O Father, Lord of Heaven and Earth, thou hast bid these things from the Wise and Prudent, and hast revealed them unto Babes, Mat. 11. 25. Where is the Wise, where is the Scribe, where is the Disputer of this World? — Seeing the World by Wisdom (i. e. by Learning) knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of Preaching to save them that believe. — See your Calling, Brethren, how not many Wise (i. e. Learned) Men after the Flesh, are called. — But God hath chosen the foolish things of the World, to confound the Wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the World, to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the World, and things which are despised, hath God chosen; yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things which are; that no Flesh might glory in his Presence, 1 Cor. 1. 20, 26, 27, 28. The former of these Texts is spoken by our Saviour himself, the other are the Words of that Apostle, who was the only Learned Man chosen to be an Apostle. They are a Demonstration, that the Truths of the Christian Religion, are adapted and levelled to the meanest Capacities, and that an arrogant or prejudiced Learning and Wisdom, do more commonly oversee those Truths than embrace them. When St. Paul saith, 1 Thiss. 5. 21. Prove all things, hold fast that which is good.

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does he not plainly recommend *to the Church of the Thessalonians* (see chap. 1. 1.) and not only to the Learned among them, that *free and sincere Inquiry*, of which I am speaking? When he commends the Jews of *Berea*, as *more Noble* than those of *Thessalonica*; because *they searched the Scriptures daily, whether those things* (i. e. the New Doctrines taught by St. Paul) *were so*, Acts 17. 11. he has thereby given to all free Inquirers, the Character of *Noble*, and pronounced all others to be base, ungenerous, ignoble, vile.

This is some part of what the Holy Scriptures say about this Matter. The truth is, they are so clear and express in the case, that the first Reformers, and after them the Protestants of all Denominations and Sects, wherever they argue against the Papists, lay it down as a *Principle*; that none are to follow their Teachers, with an implicit or blind Faith. Every one, say they, is to use his own proper *Judgment of Discretion*; the Gospel being plain and easy in all necessary Points both of Faith and Manners; there is no need of great Abili-

ties, or of Learning, but only of Sincerity and a free unprejudiced Mind, to judge truly and to choose safely. This (all know) is the common Principle of all Protestants, and the very Ground or Foundation of the Reformation; take away this, and we must necessarily return again to Rome, and to the Dictates of Holy Mother-Church.

From all these Premises, I hope I may securely infer and conclude; that *to prove all things, to try the Spirits, to search the Scriptures*, is our Wisdom as Men, our Duty as Christians, our Principle and Profession as Protestants; and that 'tis to un-man our selves, to apostatize from Christianity, and to renounce the Reformation; if any be so impious, so diffident, or so sluggish, as to believe without *Proving*, to imbrace without *Tying*, to acquiesce without *searching*. Reader, I commend thee to GOD, and to the Word of his Grace, which is able to build thee up, and to give thee an Inheritance among all them which are sanctified, Acts 20. 32.

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